DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 915 FL 017 872

AUTHOR Eiler, Mary Ann; Victor, David A.
TITLE Genre and Function in the Italian Business Letter.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 18p.; In: Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions (see FL 017 839).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Communication; *Business Correspondence; Comparative Analysis; *Contrastive Linguistics; Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; *Italian; *Language Styles; *Letters (Correspondence); *North American English

ABSTRACT

A study compared and contrasted the use of openings, summational closings, and closures in Italian and U.S. business letters to examine the role of culture in international business communication. It is argued that the Italian business letter should be studied in a functional intra-cultural perspective where its meaning creates and maintains social reality. To support this proposition, cultural idioms and genre markers in letter openings and closings are identified as requiring explicit understanding by students of international commerce and by students of Italian who are studying the genre. Three types of Italian business letters are reviewed and classified, and the results are discussed. Analysis of U.S. letters reveals them to be far more formulaic and consistent by comparison, resulting in a completely opposite tonal quality. Additional research on "live file" Italian letters and on Italian-American intercultural business correspondence is recommended. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED304915

GENRE AND FUNCTION IN THE ITALIAN BUSINESS LETTER

by Mary Ann Eiler
American Medical Association
and David A. Victor
Eastern Michigan University

In: Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G VOGHT

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

FL017872

Introduction

This paper examines the use of openings, summational closings and closures in the Italian business letter. It then compares and contrasts the Italian business writing practices with the function of standard U.S. letter openings, summational closings and closures.

Contrasting the function of U.S. letter parts to those in the Italian letter is akin to comparing the proverbial apples and oranges if examined directly. It is, however, the hope that such a contrast might bring into clearer focus the role of culture in business communication conducted internationally.

Part I: The Italian Letter

This study argues that the Italian business letter should be studied in a functional intra-cultural perspective where its meaning creates social reality and maintains that same reality. To support this thesis cultural idioms and genre markers in the openings and closings of the letter are identified as requiring explicit understanding by students of international commerce and students of Italian studying the genre. In a series of examples presented earlier (Association of American Business Conference, Kansas City 1987) I identified closings of the Italian letter were identified as including (1) a summation that re-iterates the tone or attitude of the text and (2) a closure that includes stylistic features like expressions of politeness and honorifics. Summation and closure apply when the letter is of "greater

importance" and complexity; closure alone applies when the letter involves routine communications or transactions (Manuale Di Corrispondenza Commerciale 56). Thus, while summation is reduced in some contexts or non-existent, closure rarely is. Openings, like closings, are variable given addressees and purpose.

To support these findings, this paper reviews and classifies a variety of Italian letters by type: (1) letters between a home office and branches (2) letters between a firm and its outside customers (3) internal letters regarding matters of human resources e.g., maternity leave, leaves of absence, etc. (Corrispondenza Commerciale Italiana 3-201) Based on a sample of textbooks and manuals used in Italian business classes in the U.S., the study concludes that (1) summations and closures are never arbitrary but rather genre-specific formulae that convey both social and cultural meaning, (2) summations and closures are often realized in highly elaborate syntax or elaborate code (Class, Codes, and Control: Applied Studies Towards a Sociology of Language 253) that is often non-translatable in a literal sense, and (3) summations and closures are context-specific given the type of letter and the interpersonal relationship that exists between receiver and sender. In short, it is argued that the Italian business letter should be approached both intra-and-inter-culturally at the level of genre with a delineation of its obligatory and optional properties as is the case in genre studies ("The Structure of the Nursery Tale: An Essay in Text Typology" 95-114) and that it should be analyzed in a social-

cultural context just as instances of individual semantic choice have been studied in register varieties (Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning 223) and in translation theory and practice (24 Centuries of Language Teaching 9-34) as well as in the social context of speech acts in second language learning (Disclosure Analysis in Second Language Research 78).

SUMMATION-CONCLUSION

The summation-conclusion or la conclusione of the Italian business letter is formulaic and distinct from the linguistic closure of il commiato or simple end. Summation-conclusion consists of various expressions of courtesy according to a standard form that is brief but cogent and contained within a sentence. The purpose is to summarize the tone of previous text and reflect the author's position or stance regarding the arguments or material discussed. If the intent of the letter is to be "evasive," according to Fumagalli, the author deletes la conclusione. As Fumagalli explains, "Infatti, una delle techniche per redigere le lettere evasive, e data appunto dall'omettere completamente la conclusione e passare direttamente al commiato--e.g., In fact, one of the techniques in the drafting of evasive letters is prescribed precisely by omitting completely la conclusione and passing directly to il commiato."

Within la conclusione, however, even further sociolinguistic differentiation exists. La conclusione can be text-specific and re-iterative of earlier passages OR it can default to a type of

linguistic template--di maniera (e.g., manneristic, or stylistic). The first solution, as Fumagalli explains is employed in complex and important cases. Examples of these, translated from Fumagalli, include:

1. The causes of the accident are not therefore attributable to our technical management but to lack of observation of preventive norms that had been previously communicated.
2. To conclude, we do not think that the installed plant can resume its full production before another two months and we entreat you to consider the production schedule in light of these facts.

Fumagalli further points out the linguistic rules for these conclusions as consisting of (i) logical consequence with what has preceded (ii) definitive synthesis of the informative scope of the letter, and (iii) sentence generally composed of two co-ordinate propositions one of which re-capitulates the arguments while the other exhibits the theses that are demonstrated.

La conclusione di maniera or the conclusion of the template variety, on the other hand, as Fumagalli explains, is generally employed in letters of administrative routine. Among the examples in Fumagalli's list we find manneristic conclusions like:

1. In attesa di vostro cortese avviso
   (Awaiting your gracious opinion)
2. Nella speranza di un favorevole riscontro
   (With hope of a favorable audit)
3. Assicurandovi della migliore nostra attenzione
   (Assuring you of our best attention)
4. Confidando in una vostra favorevole risposta
   (Trusting in your favorable reply)

Our research, however, goes beyond the given of la conclusione and its varieties and il commiato as properties of the Italian business letter by investigating where and to what level of elaboration and honorific expression the la conclusione appears and by type of letter as defined by content or field of discourse and tenor or role relationships between sender and receiver as these variables are defined by Halliday ("Text as Semantic Choice in Social Contexts" 193). The varieties of letters in the first phase of research that appears below are from Manuale Di Corrispondenza Commerciale.

IL COMMIATO

Before identifying examples of il commiato by type of letter from samples in Corrispondenza Commercialde Italiana, il commiato, according to Fumagalli, should be described. What follows is a translated synthesis of its features:

> Even il commiato is tied to formulae of protocol, however, well its rigidity may be minimized by extension of text. Principally, the word salute (greetings) is used between or among offices and usually regarding business matters. The degree of the letter's fervor or the type of rapport that one has with the recipient will suggest whether distinti salute (e.g., distinct greetings), cordiali salute e.g., cordially greetings) or i nostri migliori salute (e.g., our best greetings) are used.)

Fumagalli prefers that the writer avoid what he calls "bureaucratic" phrases like nel mentre siamo in attesa di una vostra cortese risposta, vi porgiamo i mostri piu distinti salui (e.g., while anticipating your kind reply, we extend to you our most distinct greetings) and write instead a more original text --una vostra risposta ci sara molto gradita e nel frattempo vi

preghiamo di accogliere i nostri miglior salute (e.g., your reply would be most pleasing and in the meantime we extend to you our very best wishes). Il commiato exists not only for closure but has several additional social functions, which include but are not limited to:

the expression of satisfaction with business matters
delineation of excuses for an incident
invitation for personal encounter
request for services
display of regret because of a negative response
re-iterative summation of the letter's tone

DISCUSSION OF LETTERS

Distinti Salute appears as the dominant closure in the following varieties of letters: letters from a firm to their representative to establish terms of client payment, letters from a firm to representatives announcing branch offices, letters from a firm to representatives asking that they visit clients, letters from a firm to representatives regarding commission, and letters from a firm to representatives regarding client payment schedule. Although still within the protocol of il commiato, as established by Fumagalli, an amplification of text or elaboration of code appears when the letters appear to address money involvements for the firm. For example, we find Vi saluto distintamente in a letter from a representative to his firm wherein orders and payments are sent. In a letter from the representative to the

firm telling of the client's complaint, we find in attesta di leggerVi, Vi saluto Distintamente, and in a letter from the firm to the client responding to client complaint the closure is ringraziandola ancora della collaborazione, la salutiamo distintamente.

In letters involving communications between a firm and its personnel (including potential personnel like job seekers) we find a variety of protocols. In one letter from a job seeker to the firm we find considerable elaboration: Riservandomi di documentare con regolari certificati il diploma conseguito e il servizion prestato...resto in attesa di una vostra riposta e porgo ossequi--allow me to document my good references and diploma as well as my service record...awaiting your response I offer my best regards. In contrast another job seeker writes merely distinti salute. Similarly there is variation in the firm's response to a job seeker: (1)voglia gradire i nostri migliori salute vs (2)distinti salute.

Letters from a firm regarding employee's personal life or benefits tend to follow the polite il commiato with little amplification of text. In these samples we find, for example La preghiamo di ritornarci contro firmata as the closure in a letter from a firm to a female worker regarding maternity contract. In another letter from the firm to an employee telling of change of duties the administrator writes Gradisca i nostri piu distinti salute, and in a letter from a firm to an employment agency

regarding hiring of workers the message is rigid and terse--distinti salute.

When we approach correspondence between a firm and its clientele regarding conclusions of contracts or major business transactions or developments we find either (1) extensive elaboration of the il commiato or (2) la conclusione with the features delineated earlier in this paper. In a letter from a firm to its client announcing the appointment of a sales representative in their area, we find the summation and attitudinal closure that typifies la conclusione: Fiduciosi che Ella vorra intrattenere con il Signor Rossi rapporti di affari in un clima di reciproca fiducia e collaborazione, distintamente La salutiamo -- confident that you will conduct with Mr. Rossi business relations in a climate of reciprocal faith and collaboration, distinctly we send greetings. Here the author takes a distinct position e.g., collaboration and reciprocity. We find here a level of ending beyond profuse honorifics -- in short,la conclusione. Similarly, in a letter from a client requesting a catalog and conditions of sale from a firm we find a re-iteration of the "argument" of discourse of the previous text: Fiduciosi di poter intrattenere con Voi interessanti rapporti di affari, restiamo in attesa di leggerVi e Vi porgiamo distinti salute--confident to be able to satisfy your business interests we await your response and extend distint salutations. In the following letter from a firm confirming a client's order and discussing conditions requested by the client, the author

anticipates the hoped-for disposition on the part of the client: Certi che vorrete prendere nella dovuta considerazione l'agevolazione, offertaVi distintamente Vi salutiamo -- Certain you will want to take into consideration the options offered to you, we extend our greetings. In a similar letter from a client to a firm "refuting" conditions offered and suggesting others, we find the same anticipation of positive response: Siamo certi che vorrete prendere nella dovuta considerazione le nostre proposte e, in attesa di ricevere Vostre communicazioni, Vi progiamo distinti salute. This conclusione translates: We are certain that you will want to take consideration or give consideration to our proposals and waiting to receive your response we extend distinct salutations.

Letters between a firm and public entities (e.g., post office, etc.) range from no closure, il commiato, and la conclusione. The gradation seems to occur because of the writers' assessment of the level of importance the letter transmits. For example in a letter from the postal office sending a routine statement of account to the firm, there is no closing -- the text just ends. However, in another letter from the firm to the postal office contesting parts of a statement of account, we find: Vi preghiamodi voler rivedere la nostra partita e di trasmetterci il nuovo estratto conto nell'attesa, progiamo distinti salute -- We ask or entreat you to review the items we have listed and transmit to us a new statement of account, waiting your response, we extend distinct salutations.

Finally, in a letter from a firm to a public insurance entity regarding employee compensations for illness we find the simple commiato -- distinti salute.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The extent to which variation in the use of il commiato in its basic simple form or its amplified form exists in larger samples of letters remains to be tested. This testing needs to apply not only to letters in manuals of correspondence published for trade schools or commercial institutes of instruction but also in "live files" from Italian business and industry. What this paper has attempted is but the first phase of this larger research undertaking. Also, a comparative analysis of openings with closings promises to shed still further light on the language of social function in Italian correspondence. The study of both openings and closings in turn promises to tell us about the obligatory and optional properties of text in an environment where the features of genre are viewed as socially conditioned and maintained. This type of study of the social environment of language use is critical, it would seem, for students of Italian or students of business anticipating employment in Italian business or in American business where transactions with Italy occur.

PART TWO: THE U.S. LETTER

In part one of this paper, it was shown that in Italian letters openings, summational closings and closures vary according to a protocol determined by the relationship of writer and receiver. The portion of this paper that follows contrasts

this Italian practice with the function of standard U.S. letter openings, summational closings and closures. Contrasting the function of U.S. letter parts to those in the Italian letter is akin to comparing the proverbial apples and oranges if examined directly. It is, however, the hope that such a contrast might bring into clearer focus the role of culture in business communication conducted internationally.

The U.S. business letter in its ideal form (as set down in the books teaching business communication) is remarkably formulaic by comparison to its Italian counterpart. Little if any distinction is ever made regarding status over relation of writer to speaker.

U.S. business letter experts are highly consistent in their advice regarding the complimentary close - the U.S. equivalent to the Italian conclusione di maniera. Virtually every text on business communication advises nearly the exact same choice of 3 to 6 acceptable complimentary closes, almost none making distinctions on writer-reader relationships aside from mild levels of formality. Thus, Lesikar (1988) observes "By far the most commonly used complimentary close is **Sincerely**. **Sincerely yours** is also used, but in recent years the **yours** has been fading away. **Truly** (with and without the yours) is also used, but it also has lost popularity. Closes such as **Cordially** and **Respectfully** are appropriate when their meanings fit the writer-reader relationship involved." (569-570)

Andrews and Andrews (1988) indicate:

> The conventional closings - "sincerely yours," "yours truly," "sincerely" - differ little in meaning or tone. "Respectfully" implies a certain deference on the part of the writer. "Cordially," "best regards," and "best" are informal. Some organizations have their own standard sign-off or sign their letters appropriately for the season: "Go Fighting Blue Hens!" However, avoid any such closings in formal business letters. If your letter omits a salutation, then omit the complimentary close. (240-241)

Murphy and Hilderbrandt (1988) observe:

> "Most business letters use one of three key words in the complementary close - sincerely, cordially, or truly. Only the first letter in the first word is capitalized, as shown in the following complimentary closes:

> Sincerely (most popular)
> Sincerely yours, Yours sincerely
> Very truly yours, Yours very truly
> Cordially
>
> When an informal salutation like "Dear Tom" (Mary, or nickname) is used, the preferred complimentary closes are:
>
> > Sincerely, Cordially, Warm regards, Best regards (109)

Bonner (1988) in keeping with many experts, makes distinctions in complimentary close only on relative outdatedness: "Cordially, Sincerely, Cordially yours, and Sincerely yours are the most popular complimentary closes. Yours truly, Very truly yours, and Respectfully yours are outdated." (82)

In stark contrast to the Italian letter close, all of these experts affect that the choices are almost interchangeable for all aspects of the complimentary close. As Markel (1988) notes: "Today all the phrases have lost whatever particular connations they once possessed. They can be used interchangeably." (101)

Brown (1982) warns his readers:

> "Avoid hackneyed and old-fashioned expressions such as "Obligingly yours," "I beg to remain," "Hoping this meets with your approval," "Trusting this is satisfactory," and "I remain." Whether they are part of the ending sentence or are used as a complimentary close, they have no place in today's letter. (457)

Similarly, Wolfand Kuiper (1989) note:

> Participial wordings like "Thanking you in advance," "I remain" or "Hoping to receive your prompt reply, we are" wee once popular transitions to the complimentary close; but such participial transitions are considered obsolete in United States correspondence today. Move your reader directly from the last paragraph of the letter body to your complimentary close. (133)

The result is a completely opposite tonal quality between the U.S. and Italian letter. "In fact," as Andrews and Andrews (1988) observe, "American business letters are considered brusque even in the closings that we [Americans] do use." (240)

The U.S. letter is even more formulaic regarding salutations and greetings. Without exception, all of the above authors instruct that letters begin with a simple "Dear" followed by the name of the recipient and a colon. While discussion occurs over when to use "Ms." and honorific titles, the overall advice is remarkably consistent. Significantly, few actual (or live) business letters vary from the forms suggested by these experts. Gooden and Swerdlow (1987) conducted a survey on the quality of written correspondence in the United States, analyzing 13 industrial and organizational categorizer. They analyzed other factors than complimentary closings and openings, among other items for deficiencies from the norms stated above. They found a remarkable consistency as follows:

INDUSTRY	% OF LETTERS SHOWING DEFICIENCY	
	salutation	complimentary closing
Hospitality	43.3	0.0
Mass Media	70.0	0.0
Education	10.0	3.3
Insurance	16.7	16.7
Investments	20.0	10.0
Banking Services	30.0	33.3
Government	26.7	40.0
Health Services	46.7	43.3
Services Organizations	16.7	0.0
Real Estate	26.7	3.3
Retail	33.3	0.0
Manufacturing	34.5	6.7
Utilities	53.3	12.6

With the exception of utilities and mass media, all categories showed over 50% consistency in their salutations, with educators showing a 90% consistency rate.

Even more uniform were Gooden and Swerdlow's findings on complimentary closings. Health services letters showed the highest deviation from the norm with a 43.3% variance, meaning consistency for well over half in acceptable complimentary closings even in the most variable industry. Moreover, 8 of the 13 industries had a 90% or greater consistency in complementary closings with 4 of these showing 100% consistency (mass media, hospitality, service organizations and retail).

Thus, both in practice and in the ideal, U.S. business letters maintain a formulaic similarity in salutations and closings quite apart from their Italian counterparts.

Conclusion

As indicated in Part One of this paper, testing of Italian letters for findings in "live files" from Italian business and industry still needs to be performed. While, as we have seen, considerably more study of U.S. letters from live files has taken place than of Italian letters, more studies are needed to show differences, if any, that exist when U.S. letters are written with Italian recipients in mind. It would prove fruitful to examine the influence of intended audience in determining the final form of openings and closures of letters sent between cultures. It would also prove useful to determine to what extent frequent contact between Italian and U.S. correspondents affects stylistic changes among the writers. The questions of whether Italian writers are influenced stylistically by their U.S. correspondents and vice versa has yet to be studied. Additionally, it would seem useful to determine whether such culturally-linked changes in style (if they exist already or were they to be consciously undertaken) might serve as an aid to cross-cultural understanding and improved U.S. Italian communication.

WORKS CITED

Andrews, Deborah C. and William D. Andrews. Business Communication, New York: Macmillan, 1988.

Bonner, William H. Communicating in Business: Key to Success, 5th ed., Houston: Dame Publications, 1988.

Brown, Leland. Communicating Facts and Ideas in Business, 3rd ed., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982.

Class, Codes, and Control: Applied Studies Towards a Sociology of Language. Ed. Basil Bernstein, Vol. 2. London: Routledge, 1973. 2 vols. 253-292.

Eiler, Mary Ann: "Genre or Jargon? Typography or Stereotype?- Linguistic Contrasts in the Italian and American - English Business Letter and in Medical Writing. Association of Business Communication Regional Conference. Kansas City: 1987.

Goodin, Edward H. and Skip Swerdlow. "The Current Quality of Written Correspondence: A Statistical Analysis of the Performance of 13 Industry and Organizational Categories." The Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication, 50: 1, March 1987, 12-16.

Fumagalli, Giulio. Manuale Di Corrispondenza Commerciale. Bergamo: Editrice San Marco, 1973.

Halliday, M.A.K. Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning. Baltimore: u Part P, 1978.

Hasan, Ruqaiya. "Code, Reigster, and Social Dialect." Class, Codes, and Control: Applied Studies Toward a Sociology of Language. Ed. Basil Bernstein. Vol. 2. London: Routledge, 1973, 2 vols. 253-292.

Lesikar, Raymond V. Basic Business Communication, 4th ed., Homewood, Illinois: Irwing, 1988.

Kelly, Louis G. 25 Centuries of Language Teaching. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, 1976.

Lauren-Freeman, Diane. Discourse Analysis in Second Language Research. Rowley, MA: 1980.

Macotto, Giancarlo. Corrispondenza Commerciale Italiana. Torino: Societa per Azioni G.B., Paravia and C., 1976.

Markey, Michael H. Business Writing Essentials, New York: St. Martin's, 1988.

Murphy, Herta A. and Herbert W. Hildebrandt. Effective Business Communications, 5th ed., New York: McGraw Hill, 1988.

"The Structure of the Nursery Tale: An Essay in Text Typology." Linguistic Testuale. Ed. Loreazo Coveri. Rome: Bulzoni, 1984. 95-114.

Wolf, Morris P. and Shirley Kuiper. Cincinnati: South-Western, 1989.